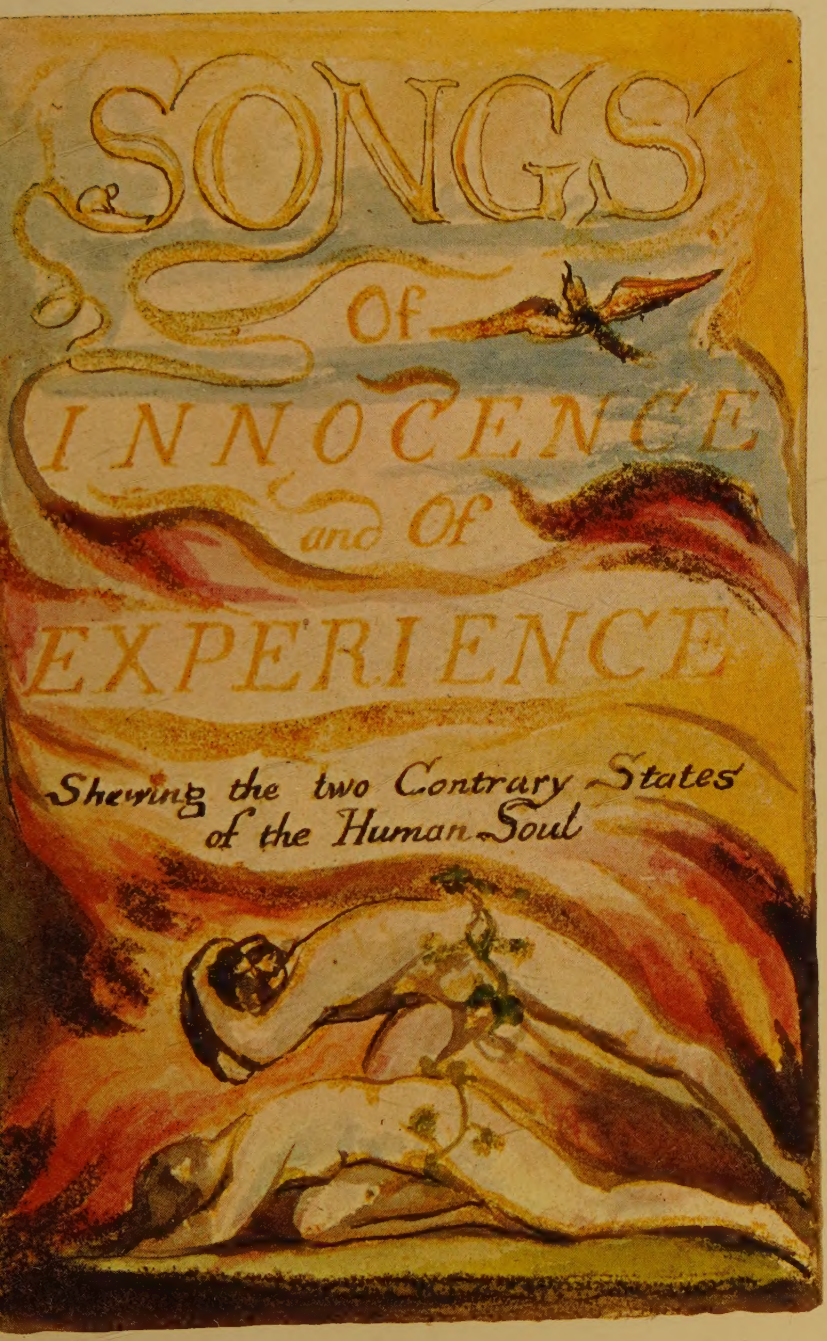
William Blake



William Blake

Songs of Innocence and of Experience

SELECTED PLATES REPRODUCED IN FACSIMILE
FROM ORIGINALS IN
THE HUNTINGTON LIBRARY

Selected and introduced by
JAMES THORPE

THE HUNTINGTON LIBRARY AND ART GALLERY
SAN MARINO, CALIFORNIA

WILLIAM BLAKE was born in London in 1757. His occupation was that of professional engraver. In 1782 he married Catherine Boucher; they had no children. He lived almost his entire life in London, where he died in 1827. Mrs. Blake died in 1831.

Songs of Innocence and of Experience were, in the original editions from which these plates are photographically reproduced, personally etched, printed, and painted in watercolor by Blake, with the assistance of Mrs. Blake. He dated *Songs of Innocence* 1789 and *Songs of Experience* 1794, and later combined the two into a book of fifty-four plates. This pamphlet contains a selection of sixteen plates. As an aid to legibility, the reproductions have been slightly enlarged (in the original the plates are, on the average, about 4⅜" tall and 2¾" wide) and a transcript of each poem has been added on the page facing the plate.

The Huntington copy from which most of these plates are reproduced is among the earliest and most carefully painted; it first belonged to Thomas Butts, one of Blake's closest friends; it was later owned by Frederick Locker-Lampson, E. Dwight Church, and Beverly Chew. Two plates (33 "The Clod & the Pebble" and 37 "The Tyger") are reproduced from another Huntington copy, earlier owned by Robert Hoe; Blake's coloring of these plates is especially interesting in this copy.

The Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, California

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Introduction

WILLIAM BLAKE'S SONGS offer something of value for almost everybody: for children and adults, for those who have read a little and those who have read a lot, for those who rarely respond to poetry and those who find it irresistible.

His songs have a strong visual appeal. They are, in fact, a remarkable union of words, drawings, design, and color. Each plate is, first of all, a picture: each of them includes people or animals in a setting, and something is happening. In order to take in the poem, we need to look carefully at the picture, observing the design and the action, sensing the attitudes and the colors, scrutinizing the details.

The great merit of this pamphlet is that it offers the chance — a chance not generally available — to read and see these poems in their wholeness, as a union of verbal art and visual art. Usually we have to content ourselves with reading them in an ordinary printed text, often jammed together to take up as little space as possible. The difference in effect is radical if we are able to take each poem in the way that Blake intended, as a speaking picture.

His songs also have a basic appeal as rhythmic language, and they almost ask to be sung. Blake is said to have had a habit of singing his songs to tunes that he made up, and the picture in "Laughing Song" shows a young man leading a group in singing that song. We can make the rhythms of the poems real by reading them aloud, by listening to them, and by reading them over and over again until they sound right to the ear.

Songs of Innocence and of Experience are intended to show what Blake considered (as the title page reproduced on the cover of this pamphlet tells us) "the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul." He exemplified the state of "Innocence" by the lamb, by laughing young people, and by children at play; but these are only symbols for a universal state of tranquillity or a way of looking at a

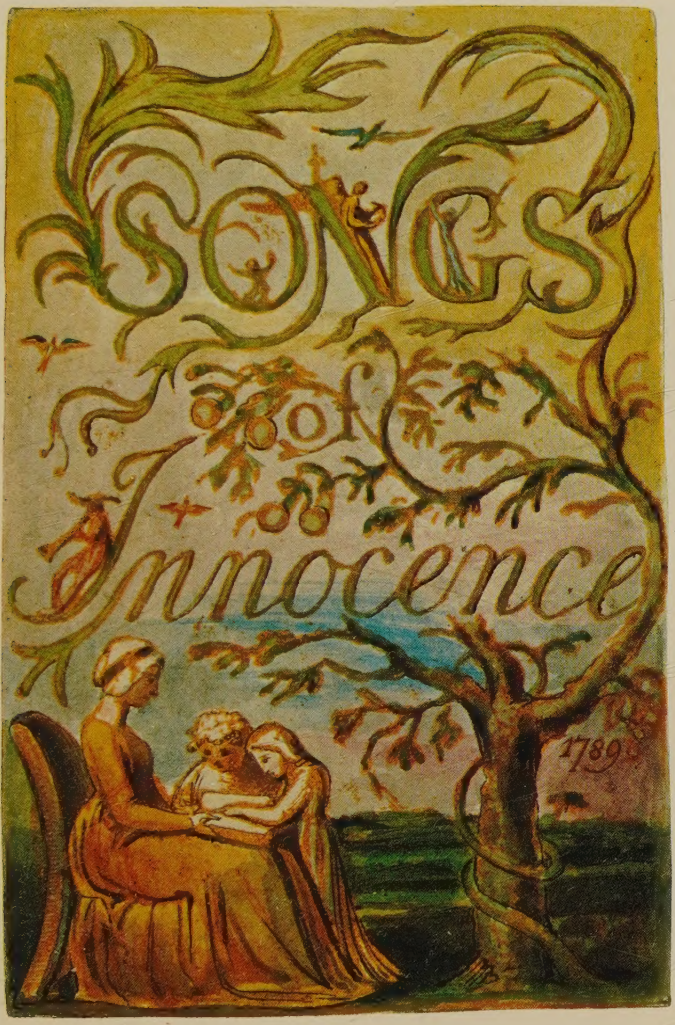
world at peace. It is perhaps too easy to brush this view aside without seeing the profoundness of its simple truth. The state of "Experience" shows examples of self-concern, selfishness, anger, and other stains of worldliness; this, too, is a state of the human soul. Some of the poems can be read as pairs to bring out the "Two Contrary States": "Nurse's Song" and "Nurses Song" dramatize freedom and restriction, "The Lamb" and "The Tyger" explore the nature of the creator, "Infant Joy" and "Infant Sorrow" display reactions of new-born life to the world outside. There are, likewise, visual suggestions that set the two states apart; the title page to the "Songs of Innocence" is almost all curves (which we tend to call "soft"), while the title page to the "Songs of Experience" has many straight lines and perpendiculars (which we tend to call "hard"), with even the flowing script of the word "Innocence" in strong contrast to the rectangular letters of the word "Experience."

Hardly anyone has ever been so completely responsible for his books as Blake was. For *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (and for almost all his other books), he was the writer, the designer, the illustrator, the printer, the publisher, and the bookseller. He developed a special process to etch his design and his text onto a copper plate; he put the plate on a press and printed it in one ground color. Usually, all the other colors were then painted in by hand in watercolor, either by Blake or by his wife.

The demand for his books was small, and he produced very few copies. He wrote and engraved about a dozen books, and (as an average) only about ten copies of each are now known; in coloring, each copy is somewhat different from its fellows.

The Huntington Library has one of the most extensive collections in the world of original Blake watercolors, pencil drawings, manuscripts, engravings, and books. That treasure trove is used by many scholars, and this pamphlet offers a small sample for all who would like to read and experience the work of William Blake in a form close to his own original.

James Thorpe


SONGS
of
Innocence
1789

Introduction

Piping down the valleys wild
Piping songs of pleasant glee
On a cloud I saw a child.
And he laughing said to me.

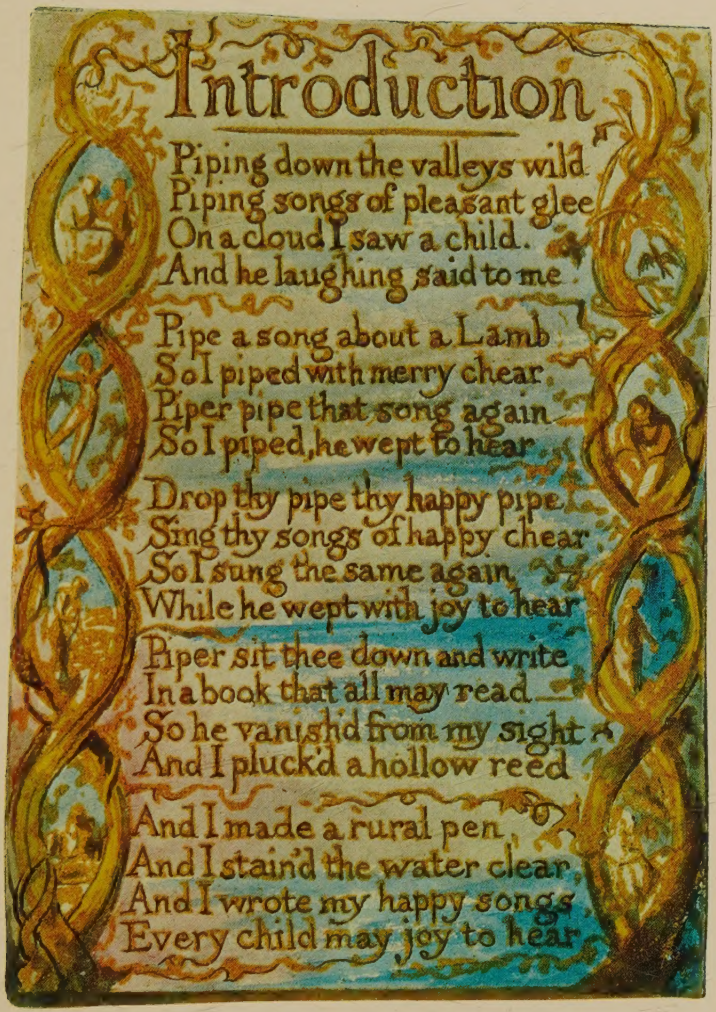
Pipe a song about a Lamb,
So I piped with merry chear,
Piper pipe that song again—
So I piped, he wept to hear.

Drop thy pipe thy happy pipe
Sing thy songs of happy chear,
So I sung the same again
While he wept with joy to hear

Piper sit thee down and write
In a book that all may read—
So he vanish'd from my sight
And I pluck'd a hollow reed

And I made a rural pen,
And I stain'd the water clear,
And I wrote my happy songs,
Every child may joy to hear

The plate reproduced on the back cover of this pamphlet is an illustration of the situation described in the beginning of this poem. That plate was, in the original edition, the frontispiece to the *Songs of Innocence.*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Infant Joy

I have no name
I am but two days old.—
What shall I call thee?
I happy am
Joy is my name,—
Sweet joy befall thee!

Pretty joy!
Sweet joy but two days old,
Sweet joy I call thee:
Thou dost smile,
I sing the while
Sweet joy befall thee.

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What shall I call thee?
I happy am
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The Lamb

Little Lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee
Gave thee life & bid thee feed.
By the stream & o'er the mead;
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing wooly bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice:
Little Lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee

Little Lamb I'll tell thee,
Little Lamb Ill tell thee;
He is called by thy name,
For he calls himself a Lamb:
He is meek & he is mild,
He became a little child:
I a child & thou a lamb.
We are called by his name.
Little Lamb God bless thee,
Little Lamb God bless thee.

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Laughing Song

When the green woods laugh with the voice of joy
And the dimpling stream runs laughing by,
When the air does laugh with our merry wit,
And the green hill laughs with the noise of it.

When the meadows laugh with lively green
And the grasshopper laughs in the merry scene
When Mary and Susan and Emily,
With their sweet round mouths sing Ha, Ha, He.

When the painted birds laugh in the shade
Where our table with cherries and nuts is spread
Come live & be merry and join with me,
To sing the sweet chorus of Ha, Ha, He.

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Nurse's Song

When the voices of children are heard on the green
And laughing is heard on the hill,
My heart is at rest within my breast
And everything else is still

Then come home my children the sun is gone down
And the dews of night arise
Come come leave off play, and let us away
Till the morning appears in the skies

No no let us play, for it is yet day
And we cannot go to sleep
Besides in the sky, the little birds fly
And the hills are all coverd with sheep

Well well go & play till the light fades away
And then go home to bed
The little ones leaped & shouted & laugh'd
And all the hills ecchoed

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SONGS
EXPERIENCE
1794

Introduction

Hear the voice of the Bard!
Who Present, Past, & Future sees
Whose ears have heard,
The Holy Word,
That walk'd among the ancient trees.

Calling the lapsed Soul
And weeping in the evening dew:
That might controll
The starry pole:
And fallen fallen light renew!

O Earth O Earth return!
Arise from out the dewy grass;
Night is worn,
And the morn
Rises from the slumberous mass.

Turn away no more:
Why wilt thou turn away
The starry floor
The watry shore
Is giv'n thee till the break of day.

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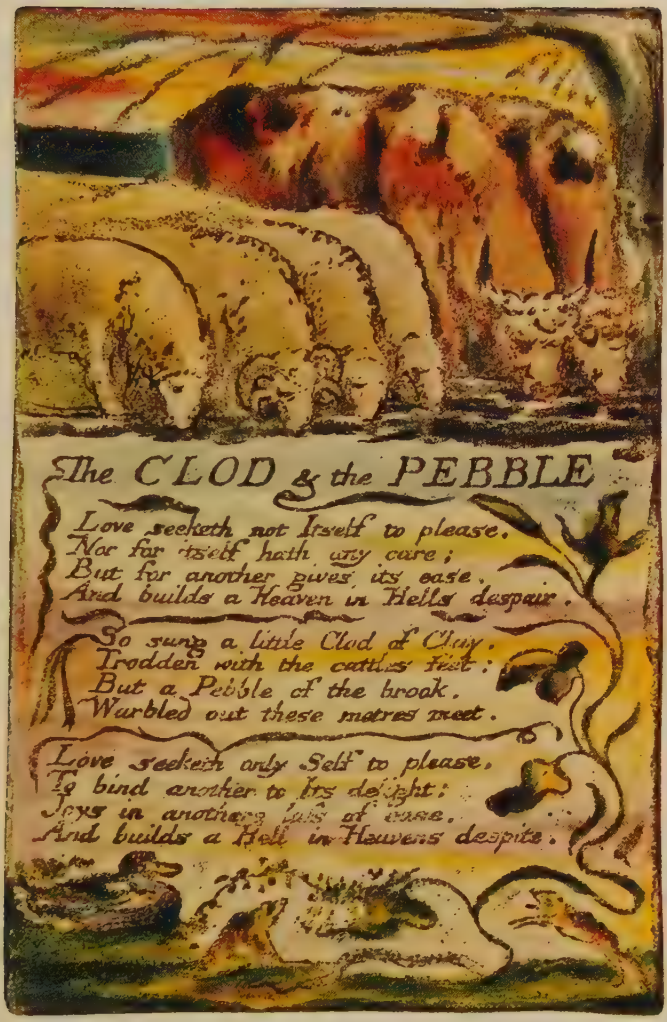
The Clod & the Pebble

Love seeketh not Itself to please,
Nor for itself hath any care;
But for another gives its ease,
And builds a Heaven in Hells despair.

So sang a little Clod of Clay,
Trodden with the cattles feet:
But a Pebble of the brook,
Warbled out these metres meet.

Love seeketh only Self to please,
To bind another to Its delight:
Joys in anothers loss of ease,
And builds a Hell in Heavens despite.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The Tyger

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare sieze the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp,
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

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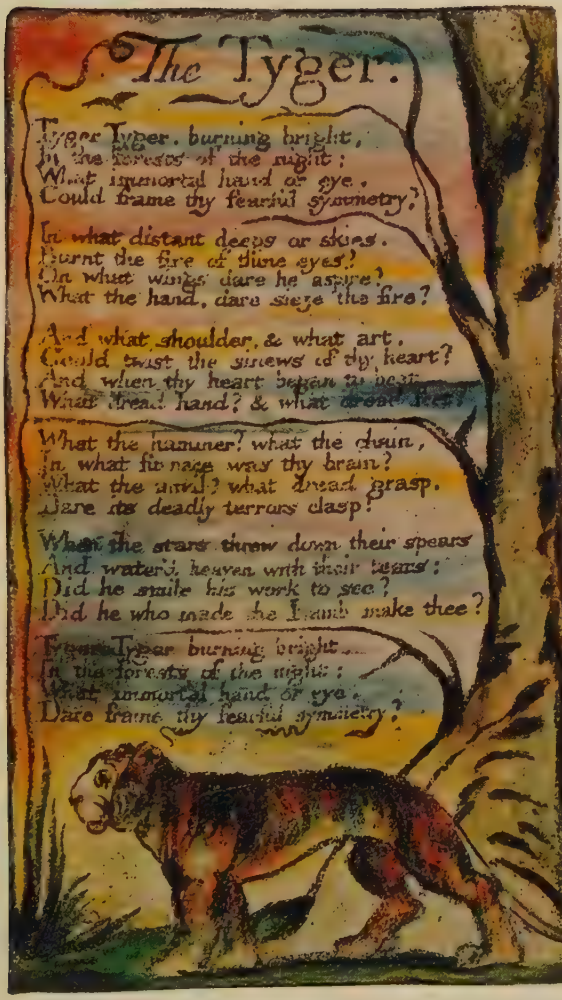
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The Sick Rose

O Rose thou art sick,
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night
In the howling storm:

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

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And whisprings are in the dale:
The days of my youth rise fresh in my mind
My face turns green and pale

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And the dews of night arise
Your spring & your day are wasted in play
And your winter and night in disguise.

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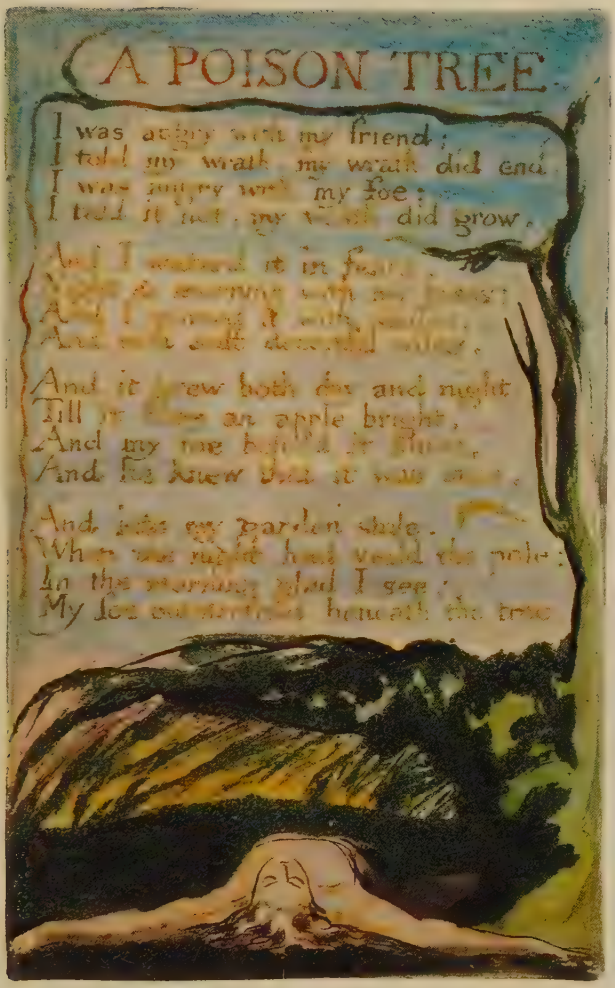
A Poison Tree

I was angry with my friend:
I told my wrath, my wrath did end
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I waterd it in fears,
Night & morning with my tears:
And I sunned it with smiles,
And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night,
Till it bore an apple bright.
And my foe beheld it shine,
And he knew that it was mine.

And into my garden stole,
When the night had veild the pole:
In the morning glad I see,
My foe outstretchd beneath the tree.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Infant Sorrow

My mother groand! my father wept.
Into the dangerous world I leapt;
Helpless, naked, piping loud:
Like a fiend hid in a cloud.

Struggling in my fathers hands:
Striving against my swadling bands:
Bound and weary I thought best
To sulk upon my mothers breast.

INFANT SORROW